

Russian Linguists Get Ready to Play the Blame Game

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Засекать: to catch someone

Every December Russian linguists vote on their favorite word of the year — one that sums up the previous 12 months. This year I'm anticipating a slew of words all connected with accusation, blame and getting caught. It's not the Summer of Love, it's the Summer of 'accuse!

In the ladder of blame, you start with the verb pair обвинять/обвинить (to accuse). This pair can be used for everyday fights in the communal kitchen and official charges. Accusations have filled the sports pages every day this summer: Лучшую российскую биатлонистку обвиняют в применении допинга (Russia's best female biathlon athlete has been accused of doping.)

Then you blame someone — винить. This is what you do when your kid comes home from

school with a bad mark on his exam: Родители в этой ситуации, как правило, винят педагогов (In this situation, parents usually blame the teachers.) But you might blame someone closer to home: Виновата я, одна я, сына не вините! (I'm to blame — just me! Don't blame my son!)

More colloquially, you can pile blame on someone: сваливать. While the other blaming and accusing verbs are neutral as to the truth of the claims, сваливать is used when the blame is unfair: Саша высказался в том, что не надо сваливать на Алёшу, Алёша здесь ни при чём (Sasha said that we shouldn't dump all the blame on Alyosha because Alyosha had nothing to do with it.) This is not a nice thing to do: Сваливать свою вину на других — это не трудно, но очень противно (Blaming others for what you did isn't hard to do, but it's disgusting.)

Next up is упрекать/упрекнуть (to rebuke, reproach). With these words, we're upping the accusatory ante. Упрекать generally means to scold someone, but it implies that you've already accused them, blamed them, and now have moved on to the first part of the punishment: a tongue-lashing. Я упрекал вас в конъюнктурности (I accused you of opportunism.) Sometimes it's hard to see the sin: Его упрекали за то, что он носит фрак, ходит на балы, знает иностранные языки, за то, что он обаятелен и красив (He was chided for wearing a tailcoat, attending balls, knowing foreign languages and being charming and handsome.) Какой позор (What a disgrace!)

This can also be expressed with the description of a gesture — тыкать пальцем (to point the finger). В нас, врагов, вечно будут тыкать пальцем (They are always going to point the finger at us, their enemies.)

The jig is up with поймать (to catch). Я поймала его на лжи (I caught him in a lie.) A slangy way of saying this is засека́ть (to catch someone out), often used to mean seeing someone doing something they shouldn't be doing. Я пару раз сына засекала на посещении порносайтов (A couple of times I caught my son on porn websites.)

But with уличить, you're really in trouble. This means being caught in the act. The porn-watching kid's friend might ask: Уличил тебя в чём-то? (Did you get caught doing something wrong?) But sometimes it's more serious: Уличённые в допинге российские легкоатлеты сдали олимпийские медали (The Russian track-and-field athletes who were caught doping turned in their Olympic medals.)

What do you do if accused? Take a lesson from the kid: Я отмазался (I talked my way out of it.)

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